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The representation of the *Orang Asli* community in a Malaysian Media

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Abstract. This study examine the representation of the Orang Asli in the New Straits Times (a local English

daily) and determines the themes in this daily regarding this community firstly, 35 years after independence i.e.in

the year 1992 and secondly 16 years later in 2008 that is 51 years after independence with a view to determining if

the representation of the community had undergone change. The theoretical framework provided by agenda

setting serves as the basis for analyzing the data. The findings reveal that the positioning and representation of the

community did not undergo any change over the two time frames.

Keywords: Orang Asli, New Straits Times and Malaysia

1. Introduction

The Orang Asli are the indigenous minority peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. The term Orang Asli is a

Malay term means “original people” or “first people” (Nicholas & Singh, 1996). Up till December 2006,

their total population was about 140,000 representing a mere 5% of the total population of Malaysia (NST,

9/7/2008, p5, see also David, 2005). The community is divided into 3 main groups: Negrito, Senoi, and

Aboriginal Malay or Proto-Malay¹; which are further divided into 17 subgroups who speak a very distinct

language from others (NST, 4/11/08, p10). The Negrito are found mainly in the north, the Proto Malays in

the south and the Senois occupy the central region of the country (NST, 4/11/08, p10).

2. Aim and Methodology

This study examines how a national English daily newspaper in Malaysia i.e. *News Straits Times* (hereafter NST) represents the Orang Asli community. This is one of Malaysia’s oldest newspapers and it

has a complete online database of archived news. The criteria used by Gardikiotis et al. (2004) were used to

determine the representation of the Orang Asli in the NST. These included how frequently the community

was represented in the media, the kind of attributes used to describe the community, and the issues usually

associated with the community.

For the purpose of this study, two time frames were used. The first was 1992 i.e. 35 years after the

country achieved its independence and the second time frame selected was 16 years later i.e. 2008 making it

51 years after independence. These two years were selected because the researchers aimed to investigate if there were differences in the representation using 35 years after independence as a base line and then determining if there was any change in this representation after another 16 years. The search for the news articles were conducted using the NST online data base. Using the key word "Orang Asli or indigenous" each news article in year 1992 and 2008 was scanned. The unit of analysis encompassed news stories, editorials, and opinion columns. The theoretical framework provided by the agenda setting serves as the basis for discussion against the background of the role of the media, and in this case the printed media. Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney (1998) state that the idea behind the agenda setting is quite simple: the media over time, by featuring some issues more prominently and some issues less prominently and other issues not at all, give us a sense of what issues are important or salient; namely the amount of political or public importance a particular issue possesses. The media coverage of the Orang Asli is determined using both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the content. Smith (1975) (cited in Yan 2006, p. 2), suggests that both quantitative and qualitative analysis should be used "...because qualitative analysis deals with forms and antecedent-consequent patterns of form, while quantitative analysis deals with duration and frequency of form." The most important indicators of coverage content are, of course, themes or topics, since they reflect what the media staff perceives as newsworthy about a group" (Ma & Hildebrandt, 1993). The articles were read by two of the three writers to establish a list of potential content/coding categories, independently. After establishing an initial set of categories, the main themes were deduced from these categories. There was 90% consistency in the emergence of the main theme and sub-themes among the two coders. Making use of Gardikiotis et al., (2004) five main themes to reflect the designated news orientations i.e. political, economic, social, international and others, the following main themes were identified: social issues, corporate social responsibility, culture and tourism, economy and others (see Table 1). For the purpose of this study we substituted the political and international category with culture and tourism and corporate social responsibility as there were no news pertaining to politics and the study focused only on local news. Two of the themes overlapped, i.e. corporate social responsibility and social issues. In such a

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¹ http://www.necf.org.my/view_file.cfm?fileid=98 retrieved on the 22nd April 2009

case we used Gardikiotis et al., (2004) criteria, the news stories were categorized as one theme.

Table 1: News articles determined according to the main theme and sub-themes.

Main Themes	Sub Themes
Themes	
Sub themes	Sub themes
Social Issues	Land Rights Amenities Poverty Welfare policy
Corporate Social Responsibility	
	Donation Community Project Educational Programs
Culture & Tourism	
	Celebration/ Traditions
	Orang Asli Museum Tourism attractions
Economy	Employment
Others	Origin Orang Asli Affairs
	Department
	Calamity Individual Accomplishment

2.1. Findings

News articles on the “Orang Asli” community did not warrant a significant space in the newspaper i.e.

there was a mere total of 48 news articles in 1992 and 81 news articles in 2008. This means on an average

there were approximately only 4 news articles every month in 1992 as against 7 news articles in 2008.

The social issue seems to be prominent (see Table 2) and this is followed by corporate social responsibility. In fact according to Gardikiotis et al (2004) the media is more likely to report minority views

regarding issues pertaining to their community in general i.e. social issues rather than political and

international issues.

Table 2: Total number of news articles according to themes.

Main Themes	1992	2008
Social Issues	14	37
Corporate Social Responsibility		
	16	16
Culture & Tourism	5	10
Economy	4	2
Others	9	21
Total	48	86

The focus of the media attention was on social themes and the news articles mainly focused on the

claims regarding customary-cum-ancestral lands, lack of water and electricity and the poverty level among

the Orang Asli (see Table 3). There were high levels of anxiety and unrest among the Orang Asli when the lands they were working or staying on were used for development projects and this led the Orang Asli to organize protest marches against the state government in 2008. Yet as far back as 1996 social activist Colin Nicholas, had stated that the Orang Asli community was facing continual problems in terms of customary land rights, infrastructure and native/indigenous rights.

The content analysis also shows that the Malaysian government appears to be assisting the community. Many of the Orang Asli settlements are located on state land; as such it is important that the respective state government co-operate with the Orang Asli to jointly develop these lands. The federal government would also need the full co-operation from the state government to implement any project on these lands (NST, 28/05/92, p12 & 23/04/08, p10). As the Orang Asli do not have the land titles, when the land is cleared for development the authorities need to remember that they are also taking away their livelihood (NST, 20/02/08, p15). The Orang Asli Affairs Department was set up to develop the Orang Asli's socio-economic standing and potential and the department acts like a "gatekeeper" for all Orang Asli matters, with all government agencies having to go through it (NST, 9/8/09, p31). As such, the Orang Asli cannot sign any agreement pertaining to their land without the consent of the Director General for the Orang Asli Affairs Department (NST, 29/01/08, p 22).

The news articles highlighted these issues which reflect the problems faced by the community. It appears that in the last 16 years, i.e. after 1992 nothing much has changed as the fight for basic necessities is still a struggle for the community. In December, 2008 Senator Osman Bungsu, who represents the Orang Asli community in the Senate, said 50 per cent of the 141,230 Orang Asli were still categorized as hardcore poor or were living below the poverty level due to a surge in the cost of living (NSunT, 14/12/08, p27).

It should be pointed out that the state and federal government has for years been running projects like land development schemes and providing housing programmes for the hardcore poor which have steadily improved the financial standing of the Orang Asli community (NSUNT, 21/9/08, p32). This has occurred since 1985 through the Orang Asli Affairs Department (JHEOA) (NST, 06/04/92, p05) and by converting the Orang Asli land into oil palm and rubber plantations, the Orang Asli now have a steady source of income and this has reduced their reliance on forest products (NSUNT, 21/09/08, p32). Furthermore, the government

has also placed 250 development officers in Orang Asli settlements to look after their welfare and economy (NST, 26/06/92, p9).

Table 3: Total number news articles on Social Issues According to Sub-themes

Social Issues Theme 1992 2008

Land Rights 7 17

Amenities 2 7

Poverty 1 6

Welfare Policy 5 7

Total 15 37

The many corporate social responsibility projects run by corporate organizations portray the Orang

Asli as beneficiaries (see Table 4). News articles have depicted them as welcoming such aid, and this only

further intensifies the portrayal of the Orang Asli community as a dependent community-dependent both on

government and private organizations for handouts and aid. Earlier research findings also show that ethnic

minorities more often appear as targets or recipients of policies and are rarely actively involved in political

processes (cf. ter Wal, 2002, p 944)

Table 4: Total number news articles on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) According to Sub-themes

CSR theme 1992 2008

Donation 6 4

Community Project 8 7

Educational Program 2 5

Total 16 16

The Orang Asli have varied occupations and ways of life, some live close to the coast and are mainly

fishermen, some have taken up permanent agriculture, others still engage in ewwiddening (hill rice

cultivation), hunting and gathering and a very small number are still semi-nomadic (Colins Nicholas, 1996).

Living in and off the forest, nature is very much part of the Orang Asli's life (New Straits Times, 09/07/2008,

p5). Such a life style appears not to have drawn the attention of the newspaper. Even as a tourist attraction

only five news articles were published in 1992 and 10 in 2008 (see Table 5).

Table 5: Total number of news article on Culture and Tourism according to sub-themes.

Culture & Tourism

theme

1992 2008

Celebration /Tradition 1 3

Orang Asli museum 0 3

Tourism attraction 4 4

Total 5 10

Even economics, which is important in any community, was minimally featured. There were only 4

news stories in 1992 and 2 news stories in 2008.

The next theme was Others. This is all encompassing and includes accidents, murder, the history of the “Orang Asli”, the beginnings of the Orang Asli Affairs Department and success stories of individual Orang Asli (see Table 6). Most of these articles were small (less than 250 words) but a few were covered in the main section of the newspapers.

Table 6: Total number of news article on Others according to sub-themes

Others theme 1992 2008

Origin 3 4
 Orang Asli Affairs Department 0 4
 Calamity 5 7
 Individual accomplishment 1 6
Total 9 21

2.2. Discussion and Conclusion

Cottel ((2000, 2006 in Saeed, 2007) argues that the media holds a powerful position in conveying, explaining and articulating specific discourse that help represent (and misrepresent) minority groups.

Statements or attributes that emphasize consensus (such as, “stateless people in the country” (NST, 8/5/08, p8) ‘very poor’ (NST, 9/5/92, p4) or ‘underprivileged’(NST,21/10/08,p7) , deprived (NST, 8/3/08, p29), “forgotten community”(NST,25/7/08,p4),less fortunate (NST,14/9/08,p4),neglected (NST, 31/12/92, p6)

marginalized(NST,15/4/08,p22) or evaluation of the position (such as, ‘aid given’(NST,4/10/08,p), ‘antidevelopment or anti-establishment(14/9/08,p10)’, ‘monotonous attitude ’(NST,14/12/08,p27), ‘laid back approach’(NST,14/12/08,p27) may affect perceptions of the readers of the general representation of the

Orang Asli. Readers who know little about the Orang Asli often rely on the media as a source of information, and negative portrayals might result in negative perceptions of a community (see ter Wal et al, 2005). Such representations are undoubtedly influential in shaping opinions about ethnic minorities.

The findings also indicate that the kind of traits used to describe the status of the *Orang Asli* portray

them as either as a victim or beneficiary. As victims when it comes to their customary land rights and

indigenous/ native rights, the lack of authority /political representation makes them the victim of circumstances. The many corporate social responsibility projects run by corporate organizations only emphasise the Orang Asli as beneficiaries.

What is significant is that the voice of the Orang Asli is not heard in these newspaper stories. The

news articles did not communicate to readers the achievements and positive contribution of the community

to society in general, i.e. there is only one news article in 1992 but this increases to 6 in 2008.

News articles

on Orang Asli appeared to highlight their status as an underprivileged community with constant need for

assistance. By emphasizing or frequently mentioning these issues the daily increases the salience of these issues for the reading public.

The question is how much cultural autonomy and land ownership is going to be awarded to them?

The question of land titles has remained a contentious issue with the Orang Asli since 1992 (NST, 26/10/92, p11). News articles on the dispute of customary land rights (NST, 14/9/08, p10) indicate that the Orang Asli intend to develop themselves independently with minimum assistance from the government and be just like the other communities in the country. The Orang Asli have risen to defend their rights (NST, 25/9/08, p26) as since 1992, there have been talks of the government "repossessing" the land earlier given to the Orang Asli and these are said to be in the name of development either for the country or for the community themselves (NST, 26/10/92, p11).

The fact is that the Orang Asli community would require the means (i.e. land) to survive on their own with dignity and pride without depending on government handouts forever (NST, 4/10/08, p10). The Orang Asli community feels that they are being left in the dark by the government and that the government's practice of leasing native customary rights land without consulting native communities should be put to an end (New Straits Times, 14/09/08, p10). This merely once again emphasizes the fact that the Orang Asli community does not appear to have the right to be involved in decisions regarding their economic empowerment.

Such voices must be heard more often so that the representations of the first peoples of our country are portrayed positively –the voices are crying out for rights not handouts! In fact a recent newspaper report (NST, 9/8/09, p10) reports that the Orang Asli wishes to do away with the Orang Asli Affairs Department which is described as a "stumbling block". Instead, they want to set up a council made up of Orang Asli leaders to ensure that the community is involved every step of the way when it comes to decision –making processes that affect the community. Despite a 16 year break/gap there appears to be little difference in the way the community is represented. We see some changes in 2009 and are working on this data.

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